*Live Writing*, by Ralph Fletcher

Building Character:

Start with what you know.

Build your characters from the familiar people and animals you encounter in real life.

Give physical descriptions of your characters.

Use all five senses when you describe your character.

Get your characters moving.

Watch people. Tell not just what’s happening to a character but what happening inside that character.

Get your characters talking.

Don’t overdo dialogue and especially don’t include too much dialogue in which nothing happens.

If it doesn’t move the story forward, cut it.

Inner dialogue is a great way to flesh out a character.

Beware “good guys” and “bad guys.”

Reveal the complexity of human nature. Explore contradictions in characters. Don’t have a character change too suddenly in a story.

Name your characters.

Select a name that suggests the character’s personality.

Don’t try to juggle too many characters in one piece of writing.

Voice:

Think of writing as chatting on paper.

Use conversational slang that is authentic.

Alternate long sentences with short sentences (that are really fragments). This will sound more like human speech.

Follow your passions.

Writing with voice carries honesty and conviction.

Think audience.

Try writing as if it is a letter to someone.

Be honest with the reader.

First, be honest with yourself.

Experiment with different kinds of voice.

Use humor, sarcasm, little asides to make your narrator sound like a real person.

Conflict:

The simplest was to make heat in a story is through conflict.

Person against person.

Struggle between strong-willed personalities.

Person against nature.

How a character overcomes hostile forces of nature and what he learns about himself in the process.

Internal conflict.

Don’t expect readers to wait too long before finding out what the problem is.

Slow down crucial moments.

Don’t resolve conflicts too quickly.

Beware stories that end abruptly or too predictably.

Setting

The setting can help you develop characters.

The setting can help you shape the plot.

The setting can help create a mood.

Time

Four different ways to control time.

Cutting.

Cutting allows you to skip ahead in time. When you do that you’ll want to choose just the right transition word or phrase – later, finally, the next morning, the following week – to help the reader make a smooth transition from here to where you want them to be.

Focusing on a narrow slice of time

Narrowing the time frame often makes the writing sound more dramatic and immediate.

Slowing down the hot spot.

Create a space in your writing so the reader can linger and see exactly what’s going on.

Dialogue can give the scene immediacy.

Thoughts and feelings – not just what’s happening to the characters but what’s happening inside them

Small details to slow the reader’s focus

Frame-by-frame slow motion describing the movements of the characters

Using flashback

Flashback allows you to break out of any given moment, and let a character relive an important event that happened in the past.

Often a writer will describe some object, event or sensory detail that triggers the flashback.

Flashback lets you give readers important information about the past experiences that have shaped the character. And it allows you to give a sense of a character’s inner life by revealing what memories haunt that person’s consciousness.

Be selective when you write a flashback.

Leads

A lead gives the reader important clues about what to expect in the writing that will follow.

The “GRABBER” lead

Begin with a dramatic scene – often with dialogue

Begin with an intriguing question

Begin with a surprise

Introducing the narrator

Some leads do nothing more than establish who is telling the story, sometimes with the narrator speaking directly to the reader.

The moody lead

A description of a place that sets the mood for what is to follow

Sound effects

Narrative lead

Misleading lead

Beginning at the end

Disturbing fact or statistic

Sentence fragments

Ends

Trust your reader.

Don’t make your ending do too much.

Circular endings

Leave the reader with a satisfied feeling

Gives the writing balance

Return to the actual beginning of the writing

Return to a detail or incident from the beginning of the story

Must be set up ahead of time – feed your reader a detail or incident early in the writing that you can come back to at the end

Surprise endings

Not as easy as they look – they must be planned for with information provided early in the text

Emotional endings

You can use simple language. Doesn’t have to be complicated. (*Charlotte’s Web*)

The Small Important Things

Write low on the food chain. Use particulars.

Use details to make complex ideas understandable.

Pick details that create vivid pictures for the reader.

Select details that make your writing sound authentic.

Important details often show up again later in the writing.

Don’t be afraid to invent details.

Beautiful sentences (golden lines)

Breathe instant life into any piece of writing

Work as a wake-up call to the reader

Use strong verbs.

Try a surprising comparison.

Beware overwriting.